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**The Evolution of Tactics: A Moral Look at the Decision
to Target Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, Commander in
Chief of Japan's Combined Fleet**



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**The Evolution of Tactics: a Moral Look at the Decision to
Target Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, Commander in Chief of
Japan's Combined Fleet**

The combat death of enemy leaders is nothing new to warfare. Kings such as Harold II of England, Richard the Lionhearted, Gustavus Adolphus and Charles XII have fallen in battle.¹ Warfare in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries took on an almost gentlemanly nature, if such can be said about warfare, in which the goal was to defeat the enemy general's tactics proving you to be the better general. Killing your opponent therefore was not desirable for anyone can beat a dead man, but if he was alive and forced to either retreat or surrender then there were no excuses to be made, you had out maneuvered the enemy.

World War II however, saw something totally new and foreign to warfare; the blatant and intentional targeting of an individual by high command with the sole intent of bringing about his death. American commanders did not attempt to capture and interrogate, or possibly take a hostage to ransom for peace, the only goal was to bring about the individuals death. At the time there seems to be

* Shugaku Homma, "Official Portrait," n.d.
<<http://www.history.navy.mil/photos/prs-for/japan/japrs-xz/i-yamto.htm>>
(23 May 03).

¹ Joseph G. Dawson III, "Targeting Military Leaders: A Historical Review", edited by R. Cargill Hall, Lightning Over Bougainville, Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, 33.

little, if any, concern as to the acceptability of such an action, but years after the event some would begin to question the use of such tactics. I suppose it is natural for it is said, "only when security is safeguarded do strong moral concerns emerge regarding the rights and well-being of outside parties."² It is the intentional targeting of combat leaders, which are still in use today as evidenced in execution of the United States lead offensive in Iraq, that I will discuss in this paper.

The mission that fostered such concern is now simply referred to as the ""Yamamoto Mission"", after the admiral who was the sole target of the sortie. Any critical look at the mission would be incomplete without some investigation into who the quarry was and how or why he drew the deadly attention of his adversaries, and a look into the actual mission itself that gave rise to the discussion.

In order to answer the question regarding the acceptability of targeting enemy combat leaders we must look at two key issues: the legality of the act and the morality of the action. Morality is naturally more complicated to answer than legality, for who decides what

² Brunk, Gregory and Donald Secrest, Howard Tamashiro. "Military Views of Morality and War: An Empirical Study of the Attitudes of Retired American Officers," International Studies Quarterly. 34, no.1 (1990): 103.

is moral? There is no single set of moral principles agreed to as there is for the conduct of war. Instead, American culture lives according to a moral system much different from that system which dictates the lives and actions of the Japanese. Therefore, this paper concerns itself only with the morality of the "Yamamoto Mission" as viewed by American culture, and leaves the question of Japanese morality for another to address.

Since the morality of an action in the American moral system is largely dependent upon the intent we can look to the possible reasons as to why a commander would order such an action, Paul Woodruff list three possible motivators for singling out Yamamoto for death: revenge for Pearl Harbor; punishment for the war crimes he was ultimately responsible for; and tactical reasons.³

Morality and warfare may at first appear to be an oxymoron to many, and though war is unarguably horrible, it is not unarguably immoral. True, there are immoral wars, just as there are immoral priests, and there are immoral acts within a "good war", just as there are immoral acts of law within any legal system. If a war is to be moral however, then the matter in which it is fought must also be

³ Paul B. Woodruff, "Was It Right To Gun For Yamamoto?" edited by R. Cargill Hall, Lightning Over Bougainville, (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 48.

moral, the tactics used must champion those values held by the society in question for by definition when one abandons their morals they become immoral. Morality is not a static ideal; it changes and evolves with individuals and within society. Therefore, it is important for a society to review its past practices from time to time in order to ensure their moral principles are exemplified in their actions. When we evaluate past practices however, it is imperative to remember not to judge those responsible on present beliefs, for those beliefs may not have been held when the action took place.

In order to understand American leaders' decision to target Yamamoto we must first familiarize ourselves with Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto, who he was and why America felt threatened by his continued existence during the Second World War. A brief look into the life of Yamamoto shows a man who's mind is constantly at work judging and anticipating the next move, traits that would make him one of Japan's most able naval commanders and thereby one of America's most notable adversaries.

Yamamoto was born in 1884 to Takano Sadayoshi, but following the death of his parents and following a common Japanese tradition he was adopted by Yamamoto Tatewaki and renounced his father's surname. In 1904 he graduated from

Japan's Naval Academy at Etajima and first saw combat a year later at the battle of Japan Sea on board the Nisshin. Yamamoto himself was seriously wounded in the battle when one of the ships guns, stressed by the repeated firing and the rapid cooling as waves broke over the ships guns, exploded tearing two fingers from his left hand⁴ and peppering his lower extremities with over one hundred and twenty fragments.⁵

In 1919 he was stationed in the United States for language study at Harvard University, but failed to attend class as he was preoccupied studying United States oil production and American industry traveling from Detroit to Texas to Mexico.⁶ His failure to attend class apparently did little to effect his academic performance however as he was a top student of his class.⁷ Yamamoto further occupied his time with special interests in military articles pertaining to American air arms and their tactics. It was during this time that Yamamoto became convinced of the future role aircraft would play in combat and Japan's need

⁴ Hiroyuki Agawa, The Reluctant Admiral: Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy. (Tokyo: Kodansha International LTD. 1969), 2.

⁵ Ibid, 65.

⁶ R. Cargill Hall, Lightning Over Bougainville. (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 4.

⁷ Thomas G. Lanphier, "I Shot Down Yamamoto," The Reader's Digest, December, 1966, 82-87.

to develop an air navy, idea's which he was to push forward whole heartedly when he returned home to Japan in 1921.

The idea of an air arm was not well received in Japan. Many senior officers felt that the strength of a nation was still directly linked to, and symbolized in, battleships.⁸ Yamamoto often found himself in violent arguments with these fellow officers, which required the mediation of Prince Fushimi, about the future role of aircraft carriers and the uselessness of battleships.⁹ Though Yamamoto's dreams of a navy built around aircraft were not to be realized during his life, his able foresight and determination are largely responsible for Japan's ability to make the Pearl Harbor attack and wage a prolonged war against the United States. His then radical ideas are now considered a matter of logic amongst military strategists.¹⁰

1926 saw the return of Yamamoto to the United States, this time as the naval attaché to the Japanese embassy in Washington D.C.¹¹ Here his overwhelming passion and skill at gambling first became known to American officers who taught Yamamoto American games such as: poker, bridge, and baseball, games he was to love and play for the rest of his life.

⁸ Agawa, The Reluctant Admiral: Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy, 91.

⁹ Ibid, 92.

¹⁰ Ibid, 92-93.

¹¹ R. Cargill Hall, Lightning Over Bougainville. 6.

One could argue that it was this love for games of chance that formulated Admiral Yamamoto's strategic methods. Hoketsu Kota observed Yamamoto's tactics to be characterized by sudden assaults while playing shogi, a Japanese game resembling chess. Kota later made the remark that had America gone into the character of Yamamoto more carefully prior to the war that we might have guessed the war would have been launched by a sudden attack.¹²

As a Rear Admiral, Yamamoto participated in the London Naval disarmament conference of 1930, where he unsuccessfully pushed American and British representatives for a new treaty that would allow Japan a larger navy. Yamamoto was again chosen to represent Japan at the 1934 preliminary talks for the London Naval Conference where we are afforded a look at how Admiral Yamamoto was always thinking strategically when he spoke in English to American and British representatives on ordinary matters, but would use an interpreter on matters of importance. Yamamoto is reported to have said, "It takes twice as long when you have an interpreter, and gives you time to watch the other man and consider your next move."¹³

¹² Hiroyuki Agawa, The Reluctant Admiral: Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy. 86.

¹³ Ibid, 36.

In 1936, against his own desires, Yamamoto was appointed vice-minister of the navy where he used his political influence to weed out war hawks in an effort to use the navy to check "the army's autocratic methods" ¹⁴ towards war. It was also during this time that Yamamoto, perhaps unknowingly, predicted America's future tactics when he said; "As I see it, naval operations in the future will consist of capturing an island, then building an airfield in as short a time as possible... moving up air units, and using them to gain air and surface control over the next stretch of ocean."¹⁵

Yamamoto had always argued against the Tripartite Pact and war with Britain and the United States.¹⁶ His stubborn opposition against the Japanese army and these issues earned him great scorn by many right wing Japanese statesmen, and resulted in conspiracies to discredit him and countless death threats. At least one of which was proven serious when a man was arrested with a load of dynamite and claiming he had intended to blow up Yamamoto.¹⁷

In 1939, Yamamoto was reassigned to Commander and Chief of the Combined Fleet when the signing of the non-

¹⁴ Ibid, 120.

¹⁵ Ibid, 126.

¹⁶ Carroll V. Glines. Attack on Yamamoto. (New York: Orion Books, 1990), 49.

¹⁷ Hiroyuki Agawa, The Reluctant Admiral: Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy. 167.

aggression treaty between Germany and Russia sent shock waves through the government as Japan felt betrayed by Germany's treaty with Japan's longtime enemy. The result was the resignation of the Hiranuma cabinet and Yamamoto's reassignment as fear for his life prevented him from retaining his position. The fear was not his own however, for as Yamamoto himself wrote, "To give up his life for his sovereign and country is the military man's most cherished wish: what difference whether he give it up at the front or behind the lines?"¹⁸

Many similarities can be drawn between Admiral Yamamoto and the famous American General Robert E. Lee. Like Lee, Yamamoto strongly opposed war with the United States and held great respect and admiration for the American government and its people. Yamamoto viewed the fascist governments of Germany and Italy as immoral and took every opportunity to oppose their unification with Japan, and saw the error in his own government's policies of imperialism and the destructiveness those policies offered the Japanese people. Like Lee however, Yamamoto was a warrior who could not turn against nor abandoned his own homeland, and so it was with a heavy heart that Yamamoto, as the newly appointed Commander and Chief,

¹⁸ Ibid, 166.

turned his efforts toward the approaching war with the United States.

We can not know when exactly Yamamoto began to develop his plan for the Pearl Harbor attack, but it appears that it, at least in part, was inspired by an earlier scenario developed by a Kusaka Ryunosuke in 1927.¹⁹ Kusaka was asked to give a course in aviation tactics to ten senior officers of the navy, lacking any idea as to what to lecture about he developed a theoretical attack via aircraft on Pearl Harbor. By 1940, though the plan had been around for nearly thirteen years, it had never been offered forth as a plausible scenario until Admiral Yamamoto suggested using it to open the war against the United States.

The plan for an attack on Pearl Harbor was strongly resisted by nearly every ranking member of both the Navy and the Army. It apparently was too non-conventional for the senior members of the General Staff. Yamamoto insisted however, and even went so far as to threaten to resign if the plan was not adopted.²⁰ The plan was adopted and Yamamoto was on his way to becoming one of Japan's most revered heroes.

¹⁹ Ibid, 193.

²⁰ Burke Davis, Get Yamamoto (New York: Random House, 1969), 37.

Pearl Harbor was not his only victory however; Wake, Dutch Indies, Burma and other Japanese victories were a product of his able leadership and skilled tactics. Though some have criticized his actions at Midway,²¹ American forces then and now have always maintained that it was only due to a recent brake in the Japanese code that prevented yet another victory there.²²

By looking at Yamamoto's life it should be apparent that this was a man who was always thinking strategically, as evidence by his conduct at the London Naval disarmament conference, and very capable of anticipating his enemy's tactics, remember he predicted the United States island hopping campaign. After six months of repeated defeats at the hands of Yamamoto²³ it had become apparent to the American forces that Yamamoto had learned the American conduct of war well from his time spent in the United States,²⁴ and was hindering the American war effort.

On the evening of April 13, 1943 United States code breakers intercepted a message detailing Admiral Yamamoto's

²¹ James C. Ryan, "History may have given Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto more credit for military genius than he deserved", Perspectives 14, no. 1 (1999): 66-68.

²² Edwin T. Layton, Roger Pineau, and John Costello, And I was There (New York: William Morrow and company, INC., 1985), 405.

²³ Roger H. Beaumont, "Targeting Military Leaders: Another View," in Lightning Over Bougainville (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 36.

²⁴ Agawa, The Reluctant Admiral: Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy, 73.

planed activities for April 18.²⁵ He was to fly to Bougainville for an inspection of his front line troops in an effort to boost morale before "Operation I". "Operation I" was an offensive move to retake the island of Guadalcanal,²⁶ which had cost the Marines nearly 4,000 casualties in six months of fighting,²⁷ and was considered a necessity by the Japanese for the planned offensive against Australia.²⁸

Admiral Nimitz was immediately informed of Yamamoto's intention of flying within 400 miles of United States forces and a discussion began about the possibility of an intercept mission intended to kill the Japanese Admiral. Commandeer Edwin T. Layton observed that Yamamoto was unique in his high standing amongst not only the Japanese navy but also the Japanese civilian population stating, "...aside from the Emperor probably no man in Japan is now more important to civilian morale. If he were shot down, it would demoralize their navy... it would stun the nation."²⁹ Nimitz however, responded with concern over who would

²⁵ John T. Wible, The "Yamamoto Mission" (The Nimitz Foundation 1988), 7.

²⁶ Agawa, The Reluctant Admiral: Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy, 344.

²⁷ Frank O. Hough, "Action at Guadalcanal, "Island of Death," in Reader's Digest Illustrated story of World War II Pleasantville, (New York: The Reader's Digest Association, INC., 1969), 226.

²⁸ Ibid, 229.

²⁹ John T. Wible. The "Yamamoto Mission": Sunday April 18, 1943, 9.

replace the Japanese Commander in Chief,³⁰ for though Yamamoto was a brilliant strategist there is some value in knowing your opponent and his strategy. It was decided however, that there was no equal to Yamamoto with Layton saying to Nimitz, "it would be just as if they shot you down. There isn't anybody to replace you."³¹

At the discussions conclusion Nimitz wrote a dispatch to Admiral Halsey informing him of Yamamoto's itinerary and authorizing preliminary planning for a mission to intercept Yamamoto's bomber. Wanting to protect the code broken by American cryptographers, it was recommended that the information be attributed to Australian coast watchers around Rabaul.

Understanding the gravity of the proposed mission and the possibility of repercussions for targeting so important a person, Nimitz took care to notify Secretary Knox of the opportunity at hand and requested authorization for the mission. Though there is little written about how Washington addressed the information it appears that Secretary Knox questioned the Navy advocate general about the legality of the mission,³² and discussed it among churchmen in regards to the morality of such a blatant

³⁰ E. B. Potter, Nimitz (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1976), 233.

³¹ Carroll V. Glines, Attack on Yamamoto, 4.

³² E. B. Potter, Nimitz 233.

attempt on a specific individuals life. Though there seems to be some question as to Presidents Roosevelt's personal approval,³³ most sources agree that the President did authorize the mission.³⁴ The question had been decided, the mission was on.

When the mission was being planned and executed Major Mitchell, the flight leader responsible for the planning and execution of the mission, thought the chance of success was about a thousand to one. The mission required ground crews to work through the night in order to equip the P-38's with large belly tanks that would supply enough fuel to travel the more than 400 miles to the target.³⁵ The course of travel would have to be over water the entire length of the journey to avoid detection by Japanese outpost on nearby islands. The formation would be required to fly at wave top height to avoid detection by radar, using nothing more than a map strapped to the flight leader's thigh, a navy compass specially installed in the lead aircraft, and a wrist watch for timing.³⁶ The mission was also seen as a suicide mission, for when Secretary Knox

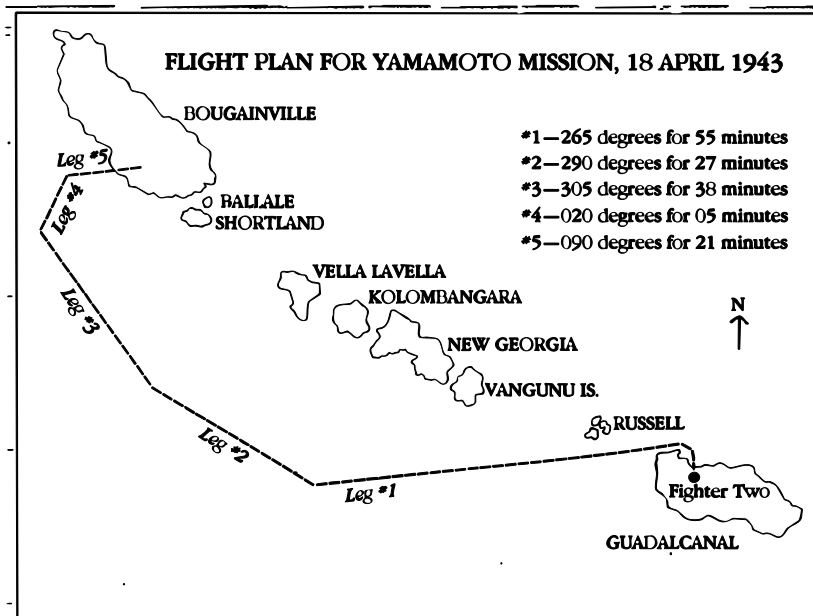
³³ Roger Pineau, "The Code Break" in Lightning Over Bougainville (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 43.

³⁴ E.B. Potter, Nimitz 233., Burke Davis, Get Yamamoto 16. and Carroll V. Glines, Attack on Yamamoto 9

³⁵ John P. Condon, "Bringing Down Yamamoto," Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute 116, no. 11(1988): 88.

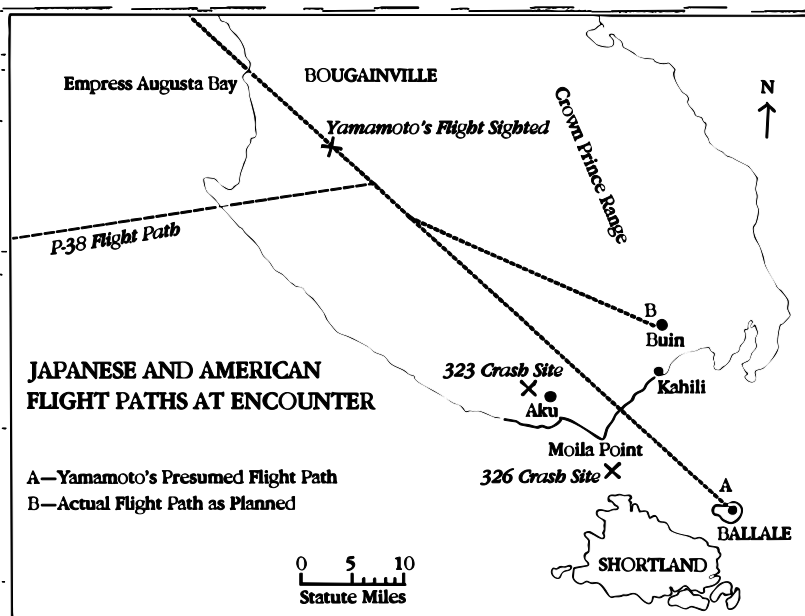
³⁶ Carroll V. Glines, Attack on Yamamoto 34.

had made a visit to Guadalcanal fifty planes were activated to provide protection for the aircraft carrying the



secretary, it seemed only logical that the Japanese would do something similar.³⁷

To compound the problem of so long an



interception, the American pilots had to estimate the aircraft flown by the Japanese (there were two different types of bombers

available with different top speeds), the course of flight, speed and weather in order to approximate a time and place

³⁷ Carroll V. Glines, "Whose Kill Was It," *Aviation*, May 1993, 44.

³⁸ Hall, *Lightning Over Bougainville*, 21.

³⁹ Hall, *Lightning Over Bougainville*, 21.

to intercept. Should the American plane arrive too early the prey would be spooked and enemy fighters could scramble to intercept, too late and the target would be on the ground and nearly impossible to distinguish. Looking back, Major Mitchell has decided a million to one odds was probably more accurate.

Despite the overwhelming odds the mission was a stunning success and earned its place in history as the longest aerial intercept in history.⁴⁰ Of the eighteen fighters to depart that morning only two encountered problems and had to abort (only one was related to the newly installed belly tanks). No fighters were waiting to escort the admiral's bomber, and though the American fighters only expected one bomber there were two to contend with and both were eliminated.⁴¹ Only one American pilot,

⁴⁰ John P. Condon, "Brining Down Yamamoto," Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute, 116, no. 11 (1988): 86.

⁴¹ Two pilots have laid claim to the downing of the aircraft carrying Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto; Thomas G. Lanphier and Rex Barber. Lanphier claims that after downing a Zero he flipped over onto his back and noticed Barber fighting off a mess of Zeros, at the same instant he spotted a bomber moving low across the jungle trying to escape. Lanphier states he became "Very stubborn about making the most of the one good shot I had coming up." This is interesting also for in all of Lanphier's accounts he is engaging the bomber from 70 degrees, "an impossible angle to hit anything", and "a lucky" shot to use his own words. So much for making the best of the one good chance, by his own admission he never had a good chance.

In another account he states that knowing he was out of range from the bomber he checked his guns in the bombers direction, he did not fire the P-38's canon and yet the right engine started to burn and then broke away from the bomber causing the bomber to flip into the jungle. What catches the eye here is the checking of the guns. A World War II fighter plane was very limited in ammunition, carrying

Raymond K. Hine, failed to return,⁴² and most importantly, the Japanese never linked the attack to a code break.⁴³

Tens of thousands of mourners turned out for Yamamoto's funeral,⁴⁴ and though the Japanese people were stunned by his death there appears to have been little discussion about the acceptability of the events surrounding his death. It took forty-five years before the morality of the mission was questioned at a symposium held to honor the events of that April day.⁴⁵

Joseph G. Dawson shows us that there is little evidence of targeting specific individuals for death in wars previous to the 20th century, and even cites an example where the Duke of Wellington forbids his artillerymen from

approximately only four hundred rounds. The significance of the carrying capacity of a fighter plane is that an experienced fighter pilot does not check his guns, which wastes ammo, after already shooting down an enemy aircraft.

Barber's version is quite different, he states that a banking movement meant to line Barber up with the bombers caused him to lose sight of one of the bombers. Not knowing which bomber Yamamoto was in, they had only planned on one, Barber engaged and closed with the one remaining bomber. He states that he fired into the right engine of the bomber and moved to the left through the fuselage of the bomber to the left engine and back again to the center of the fuselage. At about the time he centered his fire on the fuselage the plane slowed and came up on one wing. When Barber broke off his engagement the bomber had leveled off and was rapidly descending in smoke. Barber has never made a claim that he actually witnessed the bomber go down.

The controversy was officially settled by splitting the credit between the two pilots, but for those who care to investigate there is still plenty of evidence available to prove that only one is deserving of the credit.

⁴² Burk Davis, Get Yamamoto, 172.

⁴³ Hiroyuki Agawa, The Reluctant Admiral: Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy, 369.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 391.

⁴⁵ Hall, Lightning Over Bougainville, xv.

firing on Napoleon when the chance arose at the battle of Waterloo.⁴⁶ On the other hand, Roger Beaumont tells us how this trend began to change in the 20th century, citing such examples of the British commando attempt on Field Marshal Rommel. Woodruff and Davenport however, argue the morality of targeting Yamamoto. Woodruff argues that American intent was to bring the war to an end as soon as possible and that it was believed that the death of Admiral Yamamoto would help to do this and therefore America's decision was morally acceptable. Davenport generally agrees with Woodruff but draws the opposite conclusion, because he believes Yamamoto's contributions after the war would have been great, yet they were denied by this act.

The shift in World War II to elaborate camouflage schemes for command-and-control centers, and both Churchill and Hitler's time spent in underground bunkers acknowledge the known risk of leadership. The French forces even went so far as to cease using radios in command-and-control units in order to not attract enemy air attack while the United States specifically targeted suspected German headquarters.

The attack on Yamamoto was in no way unique to World War II except in its success. British commandos acting on

⁴⁶ Dawson, "Targeting Military Leaders: A Historical Review," 35.

information gleaned from an Arab informant attempted to eliminate Field Marshal Rommel on the 17th of November, 1941 on a mission that required the commandos be launched from a submarine, move 15-20 miles inland by cover of darkness and speak German to bait a guard to open a door. The guard resisted however and nearly all the commando's involved were either killed or captured. As it would turn out, Rommel had used the building only once as his headquarters, and, in any event, had been in Rome at the time of the attack.⁴⁷ However, those captured were treated quite well,⁴⁸ indicating nothing spectacular was thought of the effort for if the attempt had been perceived as criminal then Germany would have been free to prosecute the offenders regardless of their military status.

Rommel was nearly killed on the 17th of July 1944 when a spitfire, piloted by Canadian Charley Fox, spotted a staff car traveling at high speeds along a road.⁴⁹ Fox's attack caused the staff car to crash, injuring Rommel. Though it was not known who was in the vehicle and it was a chance encounter, the attack on a staff car can only have

⁴⁷ Charles Messenger, The Commandos: 1940-1946. (London: William Kimber & Co. Limited, 1985), 114.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 39

⁴⁹ Roger A. Beaumont, "Targeting Military Leaders: Another View," in Lightning Over Bougainville (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press), 38-39.

one purpose, to kill the occupants, and privates do not ride in staff cars except as drivers.

Yamamoto himself must have understood the danger associated with being the commander in chief for on the morning he boarded the bomber for that fateful flight he donned his dark green uniform, which he rarely wore, instead of the white dress uniform he nearly always wore.⁵⁰ There can be no doubt that the shift of decapitating enemy forces by removing the command element when possible was in full swing during World War II.

We have seen that the practice of targeting military leaders was in fact in effect during World War II, but does this mean the "Yamamoto Mission" was morally justified, or was it simply following an immoral trend? Here I turn your attention first to legality and then towards morality. However, let us discuss briefly the difference between legality and morality.

Laws are created as an official means of governing the actions of the citizens which live under the jurisdiction of that set of laws and a machine for addressing those individuals who violate them. Morality on the other hand provides individuals and societies with a set of ideals

⁵⁰ Hiroyuki Agawa, The Reluctant Admiral: Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy, 347.

seen as to be inherently a part of humanity by a particular group. There are several key differences here. Law directly address specific issues i.e., who has the right of way at an intersection, whereas morality provides a concept that address non-specific issues such as allowing an elderly woman with a heavy burden to pass in front of you at the check out line. Laws can not possibly address every dispute that could arise; they only seek to address those most likely to arise. Where laws fail to provide guidance it is expected that individuals will turn toward their moral compass.

The laws of war do not prohibit the targeting of generals and admirals; in fact the killing of soldiers is nearly always permissible, unless they lay down their weapons in which case it is always illegal.⁵¹ In fact, the underlying concept in the laws of war is military necessity,⁵² meaning that even those things prohibited by the laws of war, such as the killing of civilians, are permissible if they are a matter of military necessity. In other words if a town is held by the enemy, and the only means to secure the town will result in civilian casualties then it is permissible to inflict those casualties. This

⁵¹ Douglas P. Lackey, The Ethics of War and Peace (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1989), 66.

⁵² Sheldon M. Cohen, Arms and Judgment (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989), 6.

is perhaps unsettling for many, and it indeed should be, for military necessity is a slippery slope, but this goes beyond the scope of this paper. The other side to the coin however, is that if the military objectives can be accomplished without securing the town then not only is it illegal to kill the civilians, it becomes illegal to kill the soldiers within the town (as long as they do not attempt to engage the opposing army).

Yamamoto was the commander in chief of the combined fleet of Japan and viewed by American commanders as the best commander available to the Japanese. The goal of American commanders, as we will see, was to bring the war to a close as quickly as possible and it was believed that the death of Yamamoto would help to achieve such a speedy end. Under the laws of war then and now, the mission to kill Yamamoto was a legal act of war.

As stated earlier however, there are instances where what is legal is not moral. It may be legal to sue your wife for injuring your son in a car accident, knowing the insurance will pay the settlement, but most would agree it is not moral. Is it possible that the "Yamamoto Mission" falls under this category? Was it legal to kill Yamamoto, but immoral? Woodruff says we must look to intent to determine the morality of the mission and list three

possible motivations for killing Yamamoto; revenge, punishment and tactical.⁵³

The question of revenge is complicated by the natural possession of it by combatants. Battle cries have been used for centuries in combat, often times these cries are of people or places which represent a great loss for the army. Battle cries are meant to stir up emotion, to anger the troops so that their thirst for revenge will inspire heroic efforts which will carry them to victory.

Yamamoto's prominent role in the Japanese Navy and as the mastermind of Pearl Harbor made him a natural target of vengeance, and in fact revenge was a factor for both the pilots and the commanders involved in the "Yamamoto Mission".⁵⁴ In fact Besby Holmes, one of the pilots in the killer section, was in church that Sunday morning at Pearl Harbor when the bombs began to fall, and was in the air within a half an hour of the start of the attack, but by then the planes were gone.⁵⁵ We can only assume that Mr. Holmes lost friends that day, and having been selected to attack Yamamoto must have been very satisfying to his natural thirst for retribution. However, being that Holmes was not a part of the decision to target Yamamoto his

⁵³ Woodruff, "Was It Right To Gun For Yamamoto," 48.

⁵⁴ Burke Davis, Get Yamamoto, 12.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 46.

motivations can not be used to judge the mission as immoral. The motivations of the decision makers are what dictates the morality of the mission, for targeting military leaders solely for the purpose of revenge is in fact unethical; however, as we will see, revenge was a secondary benefit to the pilots and commanders of a tactical mission.

It has been argued that Admiral Yamamoto was considered a war criminal by many prominent Americans responsible for waging the war against Japan,⁵⁶ and therefore deserving of punishment. But was he a war criminal, and if so what made him so? Was it his lethal attack on Pearl Harbor, or some other heinous crime less known to the American people? If he was a war criminal is punishment a legitimate motivator for his targeting?

Pearl Harbor was attacked the morning of December 7, 1941 with out a declaration of war from Japan. The obvious response from my opponents would be that we all know that Japan had intended to deliver a formal declaration of war to the United States prior to the attack, but that confusion resulted in the attack occurring prior to the declaration of war.⁵⁷ My first response to such an argument

⁵⁶ Ibid, 19.

⁵⁷ Agawa, The Reluctant Admiral: Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy, 259.

is that we must keep in mind that what we know today can not be used to judge the men of yesterday. It seems apparent that when the declaration of war was delivered that the natural course of events would have lead to the discovery that Japan had intended to declare war prior to the attack and that it was a simple and understandable mistake. This would seem to negate an argument of ignorance, but does it? We must keep in mind that America had just lost thousands of lives due to an unexpected attack. How could we expect our leaders to believe our newly sworn enemies that it was an accident?

Let us however, entertain the idea that the declaration of war had been delivered prior to the bombs exploding as planned, would this have changed the idea that the attack was illegal and immoral?

The Japanese navy, headed by Admiral Yamamoto, knowingly set into action a sequence of events that would result in the death and destruction of United States personnel and property during a time of peace with full knowledge and intent of deceiving the United States by using to their advantage the current state of peace between the United States and Japan. The Japanese government even went so far as to continue peace talks with the United States while they readied and positioned their war ships to

attack Pearl Harbor. The intent here was obvious, to keep the United States unprepared to defend itself while the Japanese fleet readied itself to destroy the American Pacific Fleet. I argue that the attack on Pearl Harbor took place the moment the Japanese fleet left port for Hawaii.

Law and morality both make exceptions to nearly any rule however, and it may be that one exists here. Though Japan did intentionally deceive America so as to enable them to crush our fleet we must understand that it was not without provocation. Finding Japan's aggressiveness unfavorable the United States began to apply pressure to dissuade Japan from its imperialistic advances. When Japan failed to concede, and joined Germany and Italy in the Tripartite Pact the United States refused to sell Japan oil and steel which Japan desperately needed for its war machine,⁵⁸ and of which Japan received eighty percent of its consumption from the United States.⁵⁹ In effect, Japan had been backed into the proverbial corner and saw no way out but to fight a vastly superior force. A force that had used its political and industrial might to ensure its own

⁵⁸ James C. Ryan, "History may have given Japanese Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto more credit for military genius than he deserved." *Perspectives* 66.

⁵⁹ Hiroyuki Agawa, The Reluctant Admiral: Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy, 188-189.

superiority.⁶⁰ Japan's only hope was a surprise attack that would annihilate the American Pacific Fleet and Yamamoto understood this.

It may be difficult to say with certainty whether the attack on Pearl Harbor was criminal or not, but it was without a doubt questionable. What should leave no confusion however was Japan decision to attack the barracks housing the pilots of American fighter planes. The laws of war since the time of the Hague convention, which Japan signed in 1899,⁶¹ have specifically prohibited the use of force against unarmed persons both civilian and military. The men in the barracks being fighter pilots had no weapons available to them in which they could return fire of any sort and therefore ceased to be combatants and legitimate targets of war.

As the commander of the Japanese navy and the master mind of Pearl Harbor, Admiral Yamamoto was personally responsible for targeting the pilots' barracks thereby making Admiral Yamamoto a war criminal. Furthermore, as the case of General Tomoyuki Yamashita points out, commanders are ultimately responsible for the crimes of the men under their command.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 27-29.

⁶¹ Sheldon M. Cohen, Arms and Judgment, 10.

General Yamashita, being found guilty of war crimes when his men executed prisoners of war as United States forces recaptured the Philippines, appealed to the United States Supreme Court claiming that he had not ordered or committed any war crimes. Yamashita argued that due to the chaotic conditions of combat he had lost contact with his troops and was only in effective command of the troops in his presence and was therefore not responsible for the actions of his troops. The Supreme Court refused to hear his case stating:

"It is evident that the conduct of military operations by troops whose excesses are unrestrained by the orders or efforts of their commanders would almost certainly result in violations which it is the purpose of the law of war to prevent...Its purpose... would be largely defeated if the commander of an invading army could with impunity neglect to take reasonable measures for their protection. Hence the law of war presupposes that its violation is to be avoided through the control of the operations of war by commanders who are to some extent responsible for their subordinates."⁶²

⁶² Ibid, 24.

The Tokyo tribunal stated that commanders were not only responsible for failing to act upon known crimes committed by their men, but for failing to know what their troops are doing, Yamashita was hanged for his crimes. Therefore, following the case of Yamashita, Admiral Yamamoto was ultimately responsible for all of the atrocities committed by naval personnel from the date of his appointment as commander and chief to the day of his death.

As Mr. Woodruff argues however, no act of war is justified by the mere fact that an individual is guilty of a crime. Though Yamamoto was indeed a war criminal by the standards of the time, he was also entitled to a trial, a trial that Admiral Halsey looked forward to and was angered to be denied.⁶³ It may seem odd to speak of morality and war, but the simple fact is that war exists and we have the power to make it more or less moral. In order to make it more moral, we need to preserve those values and morals being fought for. This means that we must try war criminals when possible, not chase them down and execute them, therefore, if the intent of the mission was to punish a war criminal than the "Yamamoto Mission" would have been immoral.

⁶³ Burke Davis, Get Yamamoto, 188.

Yamamoto was a brilliant and successful commander whose men idolized him,⁶⁴ and was revered by his countrymen in a god like fashion.⁶⁵ His brilliant planning had nearly wiped out the American Pacific fleet in Pearl Harbor, and may have very well destroyed what was left at Midway had it not been for the fortunate breaking of the Japanese code. Wake, the Dutch Indies and Burma were other Japanese victories accomplished by Yamamoto's spectacular leadership.⁶⁶ There can be no question that the removal of Yamamoto from command of the Japanese Navy served a definite purpose for the American war effort, and in fact this is what was considered before the order was given to strike.⁶⁷

Given that the primary motivator was the removal of an effective command element whose existence was believed to be prolonging the war the "Yamamoto Mission" was in fact ethical, because its chief aim was to shorten the duration of the war thus saving lives. Further, even those who morally object to war must concede that when faced with two evils it would immoral not to choose the lesser of the two evils. Though intentionally killing an individual may be viewed as immoral by some, allowing that individual to live

⁶⁴ Ibid, 8.

⁶⁵ Agawa, The Reluctant Admiral: Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy, 392.

⁶⁶ Burke Davis, Get Yamamoto, 8.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 8.

at the expense of thousands, perhaps millions of others is even more immoral.

Though Davenport agrees that the primary motivation for targeting Yamamoto was not punishment or revenge and that it was in fact motivated by tactical considerations he does not believe the mission was ethical. Davenport argues that war should be fought in such a manner as to preserve the values being championed,⁶⁸ but he fails to make any strong connection of failed values to the "Yamamoto Mission". He argues that the targeting of high ranking military officials set a precedent that had the result of pushing leadership back from the battle lines leaving critical decisions to junior officers on the ground thereby increasing the difficulty of conducting effective warfare. In other words, setting a precedent that did us more long-term harm than short-term good.

Critical combat decisions however, were made by junior ranking officers previous to the "Yamamoto Mission". As far back as the American Civil War critical combat decisions have been made by junior officers. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, commander of the 20th Main at the battle of Gettysburg, made the critical decision to mount

⁶⁸ Manuel M. Davenport, "The Killing of Yamamoto Viewed as Ethically Wrong", edited by R. Cargill Hall, Lightning Over Bougainville, Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991, 54.

bayonets and charge the enemy when his troops had expended their ammunition and were about to be overrun. The end result, the enemy was so stunned by this maneuver that they either dropped their weapons and surrendered, or turned and ran thus saving the union forces from being flanked. Where were the commanding General and his senior officers? They were located in a position believed to be relatively safe from enemy fire.

The "Yamamoto Mission" did not push commanders back from the front, technological advances such as frequency jumping radios and other real-time communication devices have pushed the commanders back. The argument that the "Yamamoto Mission" negatively altered the command of troops in battle does not hold water.

A second argument brought forth by Mr. Davenport against the morality of targeting Yamamoto is the contributions Yamamoto could have brought to the peace table. He points out the fact that Yamamoto had been against any war with America from the start,⁶⁹ and had even gone so far as to put his life in danger through his peace keeping efforts.⁷⁰ It is unclear however, how much of Yamamoto's efforts at peace were known by the United

⁶⁹ Ibid, 55.

⁷⁰ Agawa, The Reluctant Admiral: Yamamoto and the Imperial Navy, 159.

States, if any, prior to the wars conclusion. Without the knowledge of Yamamoto's efforts he simply became a great enemy tactician that was hindering the American effort and needed to be removed. If Yamamoto's efforts had been known to American forces his removal from command can still be justified, for America's current relationship with Japan proves the admiral's presence was not needed to rebuild the nation and develop strong ties between the United States and Japan.

Davenport also raises the concern of reinforcing Japanese soldiers resolve in defeating America by killing such a revered leader. Hiroyuki Agawa tells us the death of Yamamoto had quite the opposite affect stating that, "Both for navy men and the general public, Yamamoto's death was a source not only of deep grief but of anxiety about the future course of the war."⁷¹ The killing of Yamamoto not only removed a threat but also destroyed the morale of the enemy both at home and in the trenches while serving as a motivational boost to American forces. Yamamoto's death also ended Japanese hopes of recapturing Guadalcanal, thereby preventing a Japanese offensive on Australia; at least two entire battles were prevented by his death.

⁷¹ Ibid, 388.

The Morality of war changes with time. Once it was not only permissible to rape the women, loot and burn the villages, it was considered one of the spoils of victory and was the means of payment for the services of the troops. Today that manner of warfare is not condoned and in fact can draw the fury of other nations. In the past war was a matter of attrition. Today however, enemies killed in action is less important, instead we target factories, ammo dumps, fuel supplies, and as the "Yamamoto Mission" shows, effective enemy leaders, Admiral Yamamoto was such a leader.

Yamamoto was a leader who effectively used the information gleaned from his time spent in the United States to wage a costly war. Yamamoto was a leader whose repeated success drew the attention of his adversaries who, when afforded the opportunity, decided to remove this threat in a manner sanctioned by the laws of war. The decision was made not as a form punishment for the war crimes Yamamoto was responsible for as the commander in chief of Japan's navy, and not out of revenge for the spilling of American blood. The decision to kill Yamamoto was made because he was seen as the enemy's most able strategist, one Japan could not afford to loose and one America could not allow remaining in control.

Hindsight is twenty-twenty, and we have come to learn the Admiral Isoroku Yamamoto was not the evil "Jap" portrayed in the American propaganda effort of World War II, but instead was a compassionate, intelligent man who loved America. Yamamoto was highly respected by his countrymen, and could have aided our reconstruction efforts greatly. We can not however, make the decision of who lives and who dies in war based from the possibilities of their future contributions. The man in a machine gun nest is targeted not because he has less to contribute to the peace table than the cook in the mess tent, but because the machine gunner is a greater threat. Likewise, Yamamoto was a greater threat as commander in chief of Japan's combined fleet, than he was an asset to the peace table. That is what determined his fate, and that is why the "Yamamoto Mission" is morally acceptable.

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